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Author: Jerzy Sobieraj

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JERZY SOBIERAJ
University of Silesia

Towards Unity Melville's Pictures of Civil War

In 1866, after several years of silence, Herman Melville published a volume of poetry devoted to the events of the Civil War. Though the poems are related to the successive incidents of the war, the author wrote almost all of them after the fall of Richmond¹ which, as he himself admitted, gave him a strong impulse to create the poetic pictures of the "terrible tragedy of our time"².

Battle-Pieces begins with a poem recalling John Brown's death and ends with the vision of mother America. It is not difficult to see that the whole of *Battle-Pieces* keeps chronological order. Moreover, reading the poems, one has the feeling that Melville takes special care of the unity of his work and presents consistency of vision. The unity of this collection of war poems reflects itself on several levels of which chronology seems to be one of the basic unifying mechanisms.

"The Portent", a poem focusing on John Brown's death is a natural introduction to the poetic story of the war. The event itself becomes the augury of the war:

Hidden in the cap
Is the anguish none can draw
So *your future* veils its face
Shenandoah!
But the streaming beard is shown
(Weird John Brown),
The meteor of war³.

[Italics mine]

¹ H. Melville's "Introduction" to *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of War*, ed. H. Cohen (New York, London, Toronto: 1963), p. 33.

² Ibid., p. 202.

³ In the English literary tradition meteors have been often associated with war and earthly disasters. See the "Notes" to the above edition of *Battle-Pieces*..., p. 205.

The first poem, and the next, "Misgivings" alike, comprise a similar "the future contained in the present" device, which functions here as a motor starting the action rolling event after event.

*A child may read the moody brow
Of yon black mountain lone
With shouts the torrents down the gorges go
And storms are formed behind the storm we feel:
The hemlock shakes in the rafter, the oak in the driving keel.*
[Italics mine]

The third poem, "The Conflict of Convictions" leads immediately to the next which deals with the beginning of the war. The time device is expressed more openly here.

(The poor old Past,
The future's slave,
She drudged through pain and crime
To bring about the blissful Prime,
Then-perished. There's a grave!)

The "future in the present/in the past" device sets the wheel of events of the Civil War in motion, chronologically, one by one. And consequently, the fourth poem "Apathy and Enthusiasm" announces "the finality of doom" and the following poems draw successively the history of the war: the first Manassas, the Battle of Springfield, Ball's Bluff and so on.

The second part of the volume *Verses Inscriptive and Memorial* expresses the poet's reflections on the war. The last two poems in the collection are devoted to General Lee's appealing to the Reconstruction Committee for a re-established law and a meditation about North and South, victory and defeat.

Apart from chronology there is another level of unity in *Battle-Pieces* provided by the consistent imagery Melville uses in the collection. In April 1965, the same month that Richmond fell, he attended the annual exhibition of the National Academy of Design. The pictures he saw there rendered battle scenes, slaves, and landscapes. Moreover, he often studied pictures of the Civil War in his favorite illustrated news magazines "Leslie's" and "Harper's".

His sensitivity to painting can be also discovered in his travel journals in which he mentions the battle-pieces seen in European galleries. Thus, that he named his collection of poems *Battle-Pieces*, a name that had been reserved for paintings, should not be surprising. In addition to studying the paintings, he frequently read the picturesque descriptions of war events published in various periodicals, especially in "The Rebellion Record" focusing on the history of the Civil War.

The reader of Melville's poetic pieces can observe the intensive use of color and shade; sometimes the colors are mentioned directly, but more often the poet paints his colorful battle pictures by applying a set of nouns related to nature, the nouns normally associated with colors but being at the same time the elements constituting the landscape: grass, corn, cloud, ice, river, snow, fire, flame, iron, lead. There are also light and darkness, night and day, the contrasts exposing reality of war as well the moral clash between good and evil, the forces of nature and the forces of human cruelty.

In this sequence of colorful shapes, cloud seems to be a dominant image. Often the clouds simply belong to the landscape of war ("Donelson", "The Battle for Mississippi", "Malvern Hill", "Look-out Mountain", "Chattanooga", "The Armies of the Wilderness"). But frequently the image is filled with its organic symbolic load: it becomes an ominous sign of danger, evil, and war. In "Misgivings", the second poem of the cycle, the announcement of the impending arrival of war is expressed by means of the movement of clouds.

When ocean-clouds over inland hills
Sweep storming in the late autumn brown
And horror the sudden valley fills

The image of a cloud of a symbol of danger, evil, and war is consequently exhibited throughout the text. In "Lyon" and "Tameraire" the cloud symbolizes sadness and gloom. In "The Coming Storm" the reader comes across a "demon cloud" to find "storm clouds" in "The Fortitude of the North". In the same way the coming clouds announce the arrival of war in "Lee in the Capitol".

The clouds of war come rolling home
[Italics mine]

Melville drawing a picture of ominous and imminent clouds and heaven becomes a spokesman for the Kantian definition of the sublime. For Kant, clouds and war itself belong to the essence of the sublime by the contrast between a safe position of an observer and dangerous and threatening pictures of nature and human conflict he observes⁴. The safe observer is here the reader (listener) of these poetic pictures whose sublimity would not have been achieved without Melville's poetic skill.

The cloudy sky of the time of war gives place to "the clear air" and "sunny light" on the day General Lee pays a visit to the Capitol.

With the same consistency that he draws his picture of the "clouds of war", Melville introduces the image of death as an obvious reality of war, sometimes personified as in "Chattanooga".

⁴I am referring here to the Polish edition of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* [Krytyka władzy sądzenia] (Warszawa: 1986), pp. 158, 161.

But some who gained an envied Alp,
 And — eager, ardent, earnest there —
 Dropped into Death's wide-open arms,

sometimes used for poetic comparison as in the last line of the same poem

Life was to these a dream fulfilled,
 And death a starry night.

The range of that "terrible historic tragedy of our time" claimed for the application of some universal symbolism. And here the poet met the demands making, apart from introducing rich cloud and death imagery, interesting use of the Miltonic cosmos. Since Melville saw the war as a conflict between good and evil, as "the war of Wrong and Right" ("Look-out Mountain"), the Miltonic conflict between good and bad angels was a useful comparison.

The characters occupying the Heaven and Hell of *The Paradise Lost* appear in many of Melville's poems. One can come across Satan, Raphael, Christ, Mammon, Lucifer, Beliol, Moloch, and naturally Michael. The knights of good led by Michael, the warrior, fight against the soldiers of Hell. The war is fought and won by

... brave numbers without number, massed,
 Plumed the broad way, and pouring passed —
 Bannered, beflowered ...
 Close of the war and victory's long review
 ("Lee in the Capitol")

Though the ordinary Northern soldiers are the ones whom Melville saw as the warriors for the Right, he was sensitive to the touch of the tragedy of war on both the soldiers of the North and those of the South

What could they else — North and South?
 Each went forth with blessing given
 By priests and mothers in the name of Heaven;
 And honor in both was chief.
 Warred one for Right and one for Wrong?
 So be it; but they both were young —

The poet, apart from his consistent treatment of chronology and symbolism, is very cautious about the geographical unity of the cycle. The battles are naturally fought on certain territories. The space of the poems — North and South, land and sea — emphasizes the totality and vastness of the national conflict. The chronological (historical) structure and the spatial (geographical) dimension of the poems compose together an organic wholeness and create a rich, reliable picture of the historical event.

Opposition and reconciliation, the contrast often regarded as the central theme of *Battle-Pieces*⁵, is at the same time an element reconstructing the war on its thematic, social, and purely human level. The opposition is North and South, I/we and the enemy; the reconciliation is contained in the humane aspect of war: help by the enemy, the compassion and humanity of individual soldiers. Thus compassion and humanity can be viewed here as a remedy, a solution with which the opposition can be successfully overcome.

Another attempt at finding the unity of *Battle-Pieces* is made by William H. Shurr who searches for a thematic structure of the poems in the co-existence of two cycles of thought: the cycle of law and the cycle of evil⁶. The destruction, bitterness, and pain of the war result from breaking the law. This twofold aspect of the war is intensely accentuated through many of the poems. In the cycle of law, the law is obviously prevailing. Here it is seen as a factor determining the order and harmony of the world. The cycle of law is represented by such poems as "Dupont's Round Fight", "Inscription for Graves at Pea Ridge", "Arkansas", "The Fortitude of the North", "Presentation to the Authorities", and "America".

The cycle of evil, focusing on the other factual, psycho-physical aspect of war, clearly contrasts with the law theme. In "Misgivings", "The Conflict of Convictions", "The March into Virginia", "Commemorative of a Naval Victory", "Rebel Color-bearers at Shiloh", "The Coming Storm", and "The Apparition" the reality of war is more tense, dramatic, more convincing, closer. The last of the poems perhaps more fully expresses Melville's picture of evil as a touchable and visible reality.

Convulsions came; and, where the field
 Long slept in pastoral green
 A goblin mountain was upheard
 (Sure the scared sense was all deceived),
 Marl-glen and slag-ravine.

The unreserve of ill was there
 The clinkers in her lost retreat;
 But, ere the eye could take it in,
 Or mind could comprehension win,
 It sunk — and at our feet.

So, then, Solidity's a crust —
 The core of fire below;
 All may go well for many a year,
 But who can think without a fear
 Of horrors that happen so?

⁵ E. g. H. Cohen's "Introduction" to *Battle-Pieces*..., p. II and 18.

⁶ Shurr discusses both cycles in his *The Mystery of Iniquity, Melville as Poet, 1857-1891* (Lexington: 1972), pp. 13-43.

Battle-Pieces emanates the richness of the multi-levelled, yet unified picture of the Civil War. The *ut pictura poesis* quality of the work, the scene of the Manichean battle between good and evil, and the clash between law and the wickedness of human nature reveal the universal dimension of human conflict. And Herman Melville appears here to be a skilful and sensitive poet controlling his material with a consistency of vision. Thus *Battle-Pieces* is not only a mere collection of war poems; it shares the features of a poetic narrative, telling the story of the heroic participants of that "terrible tragedy of our times".